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WOMEN CHALLENGE THE TRADITIONAL VALUES IN PAKISTANI SOCIETY

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Abstract

Four important challenges confronted women in Pakistan in the early 1990s: increasing practical literacy, gaining access to employment opportunities, promoting change in the perception of women's roles and status, and gaining a public voice both within and outside of the political process. There have been various attempts at social and legal reform aimed at improving Muslim women's lives in Pakistan during the twentieth century. Since partition, the changing status of women in Pakistan has been linked with discourse about the role of Islam in a modern state. This debate concerns the extent to which civil rights common in most Western democracies are appropriate in an Islamic society and, the way these rights should be reconciled with Islamic family law.

Shahraz's work interweaves symbolism, themes and contemporary issues. For the western reader, her stories offer a rare insight into the complex interface between long-standing village traditions, family relationships, women's rites of passage and Islamic customs. As such, they provide an original perspective on the confrontation between old and new, male and female, East and West. Her fiction is peopled with strong female characters, subjugated by patriarchal tyranny or their social situations. In *The Holy Woman*, the lives of Zarri Bano, Shazada and Zulaikha are stifled by their menfolk.

Shahraz depicts her women characters as women with strong personality. They tend to be talented, affectionate, passionate, and intellectual. Through her characters, Shahraz wants to promote and to raise the awareness of changing society. Those strong, intellectual, talented women must challenge the powerful force of the so called tradition to exist in the family. Through her characters, Shahraz also wants to show others (i.e. Western culture) that Eastern people are not as old-fashioned as they think. This research tries to analyze how women in *The Holy Woman* challenge the tradition in Pakistani family.

Keywords: Pakistani society, Pakistani women, challenging traditional values

Introduction

The decade of the 1980s has truly been a decade of the women of Pakistan. A powerful women's movement made a dramatic impact on Pakistan's political scene. They struggled against the military regime of the state. .

However, the decade of the 1980s was also a decade of degradation of Pakistani women. The Zia regime, in its search for legitimacy, in the name of Islam, embarked upon a series of measures that were designed to undermine what little

existed by way of women's legal rights, educational facilities and career opportunities - as well as the simple right for freedom of movement and protection from molestation by males. That galvanized women of the country into militant action in defense of their rights. The military regime's actions, in the name of Islam, had degraded the holy of religion by mischieving and harassing women under the title of enforcing Islamic norms, for instance the way women should dress, or the way women should or should not appear in public. Women had to defend themselves against the state but also against hostile mischief makers in the society at large. Such attacks still continue. The women have fought back (Alavi, par: 3, 2002).

These developments must be viewed against the background of quite far-reaching changes in Pakistan society in the four decades since independence, that have affected women's place in it, both in the rural society and the urban. It is the latter, the urban society, with which we shall be most concerned here, for this is where the changes challenge most forcefully established social practices and attitudes.

Gender disparities in Pakistan are severe and pervasive. Deeply rooted cultural and institutional constraints prevent Pakistani women from playing a fulfilling role in the development of their society. Their presence in the public sphere is condemned under the guise of cultural and religious values, thus, making their contribution outside the home difficult, if not impossible. Institutionalized violence against women in Pakistan allows crimes of 'passion' and 'honor' to go unpunished and has become, in the past two decades, one of the biggest constraints to widening their role in the public domain (UNDP Gender Programme in Pakistan).

Qaisra Shahraz is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, an award-winning novelist, playwright, education consultant and a college inspector. Born in Pakistan she has lived in Manchester since her childhood. She is a devoted parent of three sons. As well as being a strong, active member of the Pakistani Community here in the UK, she has excellent links with Pakistan in various capacities. Qaisra has two thriving careers in literature and in education and is a director of Gatehouse Books (The Jakarta Post, 2006). Qaisra Shahraz loves Pakistan, her country of origin, and visits it regularly. She has cemented and appreciates the strong links. She enjoys the friendship of people in the worlds of media, literature, diplomacy, arts, politics and education. All three of her novels and drama serials are set in Pakistan exploring themes and issues, which are universal. She is committed to raising awareness of many issues particularly in education and health. For instance in her first drama serial *Dil Hee To Hai* she explored the issue of dyslexia and the problem with reading. In her new drama serial *Tauheen*, she is raising the awareness of cancer and focusing on the themes of superstition and domestic violence. Under the auspices of the British Council she has more than once delivered training and workshops on the subjects of *Quality of Education, Inspections and Literature* at Agha Khan University (Karachi), Allama Iqbal University (Islamabad) and The University of Punjab (Lahore) and numerous colleges. She feels passionately about women related issues and throughout her work whether in writing or in education her aim is to empower women, to enhance their quality of life and have access to opportunities that she herself enjoys living in a developed country. Her mission is simple, to use her books to introduce the Muslim world to the Western world.

"One of my aims in writing *The Holy Woman* was to introduce the Muslim world. I was writing it when Salman Rushdie came out with *The Satanic Verses*. I was very angry, I was very upset, and I thought the West can never understand it; they think it is only a book, (but) you have to be Muslim to understand the pain", said Shahraz when interviewed by The Jakarta Post (2006)

Using her role as a writer, Shahraz is on a mission to raise awareness about other cultures and build bridges. "We desperately need (to build bridges) because life can be difficult for us Muslims in the West. People say that as a writer, people listen to you so use your influence well. Luckily I can talk, I am confident, I am proud of my faith. I feel I am using that to raise awareness and above all bring the world together," (The Jakarta Post, 2006).

In her wonderful novel she wants to show the world about the condition of women in Pakistan now. It is the compelling drama of Zarri Bano – a glamorous, passionate, intellectual young woman who falls in love with Sikander, a Karachi businessman. Her father takes a jealous, irrational dislike to the man and uses the sudden death of his son to break up the relationship. He resurrects an ancient family tradition of forcing his daughter to remain celibate by becoming his clan's 'holy woman'. From the opening pages, the reader's attention is held by the heroine's depth of personality as she undergoes a spectrum of experiences. The book has many cleverly interwoven plots which open a window onto the dust, heat and passion of rural Pakistan, as well as taking us on journeys to other Muslim lands: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. The western reader is not excluded, however. Apart from incorporating a stay in England into the story, the author deftly explains many of the cultural terms and practices without being patronizing (Shaw, 2005 par 3).

For the western reader, her stories offer a rare insight into the complex interface between long-standing village traditions, family relationships, women's rites of passage and Islamic customs. As such, they provide an original perspective on the confrontation between old and new, male and female, East and West. Further, the author is fascinated by the continued prevalence of social class and its hierarchy within tight-knit village communities which mirror wider tensions in society and the world as a whole. In particular, Shahraz's later stories and novels provide the reader with an understanding of the condition of women in contemporary Pakistani culture. Her fiction is peopled with strong female characters, subjugated by patriarchal tyranny or their social situations. In *The Holy Woman*, the lives of Zarri Bano, her mother Shazada and her grandmother Zulaikha are stifled by their menfolk, that of Chaudharani Kaniz by her hidden past and those of the village cook and washerwoman by their class – in different ways and to different extents, the characters rise above these constraints and are triumphant at the end (Shaw, 2005 par 6).

At first, I thought she would be in favor of Western view toward Islam, as she is a Pakistan woman who is now living in a Western country. However, throughout her novel, she shows us that it is culture that is to blame. This paper is aimed to see the description of women in *The Holy Woman* in challenging the traditional values in Pakistan society.

Discussion

Family, society and ultimately the whole of mankind is treated by Islam on an ethical basis. Differentiation in sex is neither a credit nor a drawback for the sexes. Therefore, when we talk about status of woman in Islam it should not lead us to think that Islam has no specific guidelines, limitations, responsibilities and obligations for men. What makes one valuable and respectable in the eyes of Allah, the Creator of mankind and the universe, is neither one's prosperity, position, intelligence, physical strength nor beauty, but only one's Allah-consciousness and awareness (taqwa). However, since in the Western culture and in cultures influenced by it, there exists a disparity between men and women there is more need for stating Islam's position on important issues in a clear way.

In Pakistan the story of a woman's deprivations start even before her birth, because the girl-child is not a particularly 'wanted' child. Her life is a journey of subordination. When she is young her father decides for her on matters ranging from whether she will get any education, to the all important matters of whom she would marry. After marriage, her husband and her in-laws get hold of her reins and decide matters on her behalf, like shall she or shall she not have a child every year, or whether she would produce only boys, or whether she can seek independent employment and so on. Finally when she becomes old and her husband gets weak or may have gone already, it is her son or sons who decide her fate in the declining years of her life. As if this is not enough, the whole society acts as an oppressor, browbeating her in to obedience. Thus, the word 'woman' in Pakistan is synonymous with 'endurance'. She is simply forced to accept certain bare facts of life once she grows up to be a woman. Be it on streets, or for that matter in restaurants, a woman is first and foremost required to be alert. It is best to try and not notice, women are told. According to Hina Jilani, Lawyer and Human Rights Activist, "the right to life of women in Pakistan is conditional on their obeying social norms and traditions." (Najam, par: 9)

Before 1970s, in rural areas, the place of women in society and their role in the division of labour in production differs very widely from region to region and also between different classes. Some areas leave women work outside their houses because the men must work in the army. In such areas, the men are compelled to leave their region because they think that their region is not prosperous anymore. They must go to other region or even to other country, and leave the women with the burden of responsibilities to work their land and their domestic share.

It is different from the richer areas, where women from the rich family are not let to work outside. They must be confined to the purdah, and excluded from any economy activities. They are secluded and isolated within the walls of their houses, as a mark of their higher status.

It is published in The Friday Times that there is a custom of Sindh province in Pakistan, in some families especially Syed (who consider themselves upper caste Muslims) families, members of the families search the proposals for their daughters, sisters in their own families and in case if they could not find any suitable match then they cover the head of the girl and teach her the Holy Quran in a ceremony. The whole life girl remains with the Quran and its called marriage with Quran. The practice is continue and the purpose is do not give the share to female members of the family.

It is mentioned that a large number of feudals in Sindh had married their daughters to the Quran. The ceremony took place after the girl of the family was asked to take a bath, after which a Quran was put before her as the men folk apologised to her for the ritual which would condemn the girl never to get married but to read the Quran every day. They were married to the Quran to prevent their share of the land going to them and thus avoid redistribution of land (Najam, 2003).

Those kinds of conditions were not in the teachings of Islam. However, since Pakistan is a Muslim majority state, it will be easy to associate these conditions with Islam. Shahraz has mission to make readers understand that there are distant differences between culture (traditions) and religion. Through the women characters in *The Holy Woman*, she tries to explain that there is something wrong in the culture. We have to go back to religion in living our lives in order not to be lost.

Those conditions were beautifully told by Shahraz in her novel. Women in *The Holy Woman* are subjugated by their men folks. It is important to note that women subjugation is not the teaching of Islam, but rather it is a form of cultural values. The female characters in this novel are subject to the unfair treatment of the cultural norms. However, by their own ways, they can overcome, not to mention, defeat the men (power) who have oppressed them.

The female characters in *The Holy Woman* have strong characteristics. Some of them represent the idea of rejecting cultural traditions. Since the novel was written in the 20th century, it is considered strange for a wealthy powerful family to resurrect ancient tradition in order to save the family inheritances and lands. Just because of the death of his only son, Habib Khan will have to find the person to whom he will leave his wealth. He does not want to pass his wealth to his son in law. It must be his own children who inherit the abundant wealth. It brings about the idea of resurrecting the ancient tradition of marrying the eldest daughter with his faith. He will marry his daughter to Quran so as to make his daughter not to live like an "ordinary" woman.

The central character in the novel is Zarri Bano. Zarri Bano is a beautiful young lady of 27 year old, who comes from a wealthy, powerful family. She is lucky to have parents who let her study until she graduates from a college. Although some rules of the family must be kept in mind, she is free to choose what kind of occupation that she likes best. As she is a brilliant woman, she desires to start her own publisher company. As her family tradition, she has to be married through an arranged marriage. But, she always feels that none of the suitors that she has met, either at University in Karachi or within her privileged family circle, come close to her ideal man.

But Habib, Zarri Bano's father seems to agree with his daughter. It seems to him, there is no men compares to his daughter's beauty and intelligent. Habib applauded his daughter's decision.

It seems to me that Shahraz wants to show the readers that it is the girl's decision to decide whether she wants to get married or not. Parents are expected to facilitate the way into the marriage, but not the decision.

Then she meets Sikander Din, a handsome young businessman, who sweeps her off her feet. The pair fall in love and wish to marry, but Zarri Bano's father Habib Khan has other ideas. Habib Khan can not take the fact that his beloved daughter will soon become Sikander's wife. He takes an instant dislike to Sikander. He tries to prevent Zarri from marrying Sikander.

A family tragedy follows. Jafar, the Khans' only son is killed in a riding accident and Habib is left with a terrible dilemma: Resurrecting an ancient and terrible tradition, Habib decides to make Zarri Bano his heiress. After a ceremony of marriage to Quran, she will lead a life of religious duty, and of celibacy. Wedding, children, the love of a man and a woman- all will be denied to her.

Zarri Bano is a woman of dignity. She has strong will and high pride. Her father notices this. Her father also knows that Zarri Bano does not like to be associated whatsoever with man for his maleness. She is a determined feminist. Zarri Bano's first reaction after hearing from her father that she is to become a Holy Woman is a rejection. She strongly rejects her father's idea. She believes that it is against woman's rights to marry a daughter to her inheritances and lands. However, when her father offends her with the statement that all she needs was a man in her life, it turns the whole things up side down. She is deeply offended by her father's statement. It makes her reconsider her decision to marry Sikander. Is it true that all she needs is a man? If it is, it will be wrong. She can not be that kind of person, a person who wants madly a man in her life.

Then she decides herself that she will show to her father and her whole family that she does not need any man in her life. Despite all her feelings of agony, she decides to be a Holy Woman. Instead of being happy by his daughter submission, Habib is sad for he lost his daughter. In some extent, Zarri Bano submission's defeat her father. Her compromise hurts him even more. In my opinion, Zarri Bano's action is kind of challenge against her patriarchal father.

The next strong character is Shahzada, Zarri Bano's mother. After hearing her husband is about to make her eldest daughter into a Holy woman, Shahzada strongly protests her husband. Never in her relationship with Habib has she questioned his consideration. She always agrees with what Habib does concerning her family. She never argues him. However, in this special case, she can not be silent. She must stand up for her daughter. She bravely argues Habib, even she was threatened by her husband to be divorced if only she argues him. It does not soften her. However, she is still restricted by the wall of traditional norms, which allow her not to detest her husband's decision publicly. So in her own way she decides to not support her husband. She hardly speaks to him when they are only by their own, but in public, she performs as an obedient wife. For that, she feels to betray her daughter. She feels guilty for not being able to defend her daughter. She hopes that she did not live in the clan which has such tradition. In her own way, she protests provocatively to her husband. For that, her husband feels painful, he must do what he believes and wants to do, although he has to threat Shahzada by saying that he will divorce her at once. Shahzada's reaction shows us that in her own way she wants to say that she does not agree with her husband's conduct and she will fight against it and it will be all right for her if only her husband divorces her.

The other strong character is Fatima. She is the washerwoman in Habib Khan's house. She is compelled to the work domain for her husband had to be amputated. He must have lost his foot in work. Fatima had to substitute her husband as a breadwinner. Although still she must work in a domestic domain, as a washerwoman, she does her work dutifully and eagerly. She knows that now there are 5 mouths to feed. She realizes that now it is her responsibility to fulfill her family. She

must swallow her pride to work at other people's house rather than working at her own, and she must leave her children for that matter. She has three daughters and one son. She has decided that all four of them must study as high as possible. She will do everything in order to be able to pay for their school fee. She struggles hard to realize her dream. Her eldest daughter, Firdaus, has graduated from a University and is about to become a headmaster in a village school. This brings about the 'rise' of her family status in the society. A washerwoman is a low job. But she must be fully respected since she is able to bring her daughters to college. In her own way, she has to break a conventional rule that a husband must be a breadwinner. She also breaks the rule that a washerwoman is not always a low job. By being a washerwoman, she can take her daughters to finish their college. It is a special achievement. It takes a strong woman to be able to compel all restraints. Fatima is also a brave servant. When she learns that Habib Khan will make Zarri Bano a Holy woman, she openly shows her disagreement toward Habib's decision. She bravely lets Sikander alone with Zarri Bano, ignoring all norms and cultural convention. She knows that by doing that she puts her work at stake, but she does it anyway. She must fight against her master. She feels that it is not right to prevent a beautiful daughter like Zarri Bano from living a normal life. It is against human rights. She is happy for Zarri Bano. She is happy that finally Zarri Bano has found a suitable man to be her husband. Yet, Zarri Bano has to leave all of that. In her own way, Fatima challenges the patriarchal society in which she lives.

Conclusion

In spite of the fact that *The Holy Woman* was written in the 20th century, Shahraz describes that there is still an ancient tradition that lives today. Since the tradition comes from the root of patriarchy, it is considered out of date and inhuman. Therefore, it must be fought. In this novel, Shahraz has many strong female characters that fight against the traditional values each in their own way. Zarri Bano represents a female character who fight agians the oppression of a father. It is a father – daughter relationship that Shahraz wants to criticize. Shahzada represents a female character who fights against her husband's authority. In traditional society, husband – wife relationship is not as moderate as it is today. A husband is superior than his wife. A wife must obediently do whatever a husband says. This kind of situation is criticized by Shahraz through her female character Shahzada. In traditional society, a master has any rights toward his servant. However, in this novel, Shahraz has a strong female character who bravely fights against her master's will. Each of these female characters challenge the patriarchal society in their own way.

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